Céline and the world's lies

A mirror held to horrors

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Louis-Ferdinand Céline

NORMANCE
Translated by Marlon Jones
328pp. Dalkey Archive. Paperback, £10.99.
978 1 56478 525 1

CONVERSATIONS WITH PROFESSOR Y
Translated by Stanford Luce
156pp. Dalkey Archive. Paperback, £10.99.
978 1 56478 449 5.

SEMMELWEIS
Translated by John Harman
110pp. Atlas Press. Paperback, £10.
978 1 900565 47 9

On June 17, 1944, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Dr Destouches, left his apartment at 4 rue Girardon, Montmartre, with his young wife Lucette and their cat Bébert, en route for Denmark, where they hoped to find refuge. For months, Céline, who assumed the identity of a Québécois travelling salesman, had hardly set foot in the streets after dark for fear of assassination. Miniature coffins were arriving in the post. His address had been broadcast on Radio Brazzaville. Execution was encouraged. He carried a gun and two vials of cyanide.

In 1939, Samuel Beckett had told Peggy Guggenheim that *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) was the best novel in French or English literature. Embarrassed by his candour (and her shocked reaction), Beckett was quick to backtrack. The novel, written by a doctor in the Clichy municipal dispensary, a veteran of the First World War decorated with the Médaille Militaire, without any literary achievements, revolutionized French literature by its language and narrative structure. Its effect on American literature was immediate. Henry Miller, who was promoted in the mid-1930s as "the American Céline", rewrote *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) in the light of his new discovery.

Mort à crédit, published in 1936, established Céline as a major author, praised by critics for his nightmare vision and for his genius. That same year he brought out *Semmelweis*, the work he had submitted as his medical thesis in 1924. It tells the story of Ignatz Semmelweis, the father of antisepsis, who was hounded to madness for claiming that it was the doctors who were causing high mortality rates in maternity wards by infecting their patients. (It was not uncommon to go straight from dissecting a corpse to deliver a baby.) Rather than being a scientific tract, *Semmelweis* is a work of historical fiction and it is an essential document for understanding Céline's development as a writer. In the case of a doctor, reviled, driven to penury and imprisoned for telling truths that could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives, Céline saw a profound echo of his own tragic situation.

The long journey of Céline, Lucette and Bébert to Denmark; their stay among collaborationist exiles at Sigmaringen; the bombing raids they experienced, are recounted in the trilogy; *Castle to Castle*, *North* and *Rigadoon*. Céline was fleeing Paris as an anti-Semitic collaborator as a result of his three controversial "pamphlets", *Bagatelles pour une massacre* (1937), *École des cadavres* (1938) and *Les Beaux Draps* (1941), polemical works which he wrote as a warning so that more bloody slaughter might be averted. Céline had been traumatized by his experience of combat as a result of which he was classed 75 per cent disabled and left with a constant roaring in his ears after a head wound. He convinced himself that a Jewish conspiracy lay behind the impending conflict with Germany, favouring a Franco-German alliance to ensure stability in Europe. Those beliefs were shared by millions. *Bagatelles pour une massacre* (which André Gide saw as an *exercice de style*) came out at around the same time as Wyndham Lewis's *The Jews: Are They Human?* (1939), and Samuel Roth's *Jews Must Live: An account of the persecution of the world by Israel* (1943). Gertrude Stein canvassed support for Hitler as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize of 1938.

The savage *épuration* of the 1940s unleashed a decade of self-laceration in France, rewriting of history and settling of scores. Céline's publisher, Robert Denoël, was assassinated in December 1945, and the author was sentenced to eighteen months in protective custody in Denmark while deportation was being considered. Unlike Ezra Pound or Knut Hamsun, Céline had made too many enemies among the elite and among Communists (especially with *Mea Culpa*, 1936) for him to be allowed to lie low in a mental asylum. Sartre lied that Céline was being paid by the Nazis, and to save his own skin, his "brother", the painter Gen Paul, lied saying that Céline had denounced Jews to the Gestapo. (It was only a matter of time, Celine joked, before someone claimed he had been Hitler's mistress.)

Céline began *Fable for Another Time* (*Féerie pour une autre fois,* 1954), writing in pencil on scraps of paper, in solitary confinement with a death sentence hanging over him. It was originally intended as the first part of a trilogy, but this was abandoned and only the second volume, *Normance*, was completed. Critics have dismissed the books as evidence of an impending mental collapse, even psychosis, or at best "a pretentious bore". This is to misunderstand his method and forget his genius. Céline believed that the role of "écrivain" had been desecrated and he would now be a "chroniqueur". Taking on this lesser status was an attempt to undermine his debasement and it linked the twentieth century with the Middle Ages, Crusades, the Black Death, public executions and torture.

Conversations with Professor Y (*Entretiens avec le professeur Y*, 1955) , a modern classic of irony and burlesque, was written to explain his contribution to literature and the path that led to the unpopular *Fable for Another Time*. A satire on critics, academics and publishers ("half pimp, half grocer"), as well as an attack on the venality and wilful blindness of modern man, drugged on propaganda, radio and television, it is an updating of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, coloured by Céline's relationship with the American academic, Milton Hindus, who corresponded with him from 1947–9, only to tear him apart in *The Crippled Giant* (1950).

Céline at home in Meudon

Céline believed that Rabelais failed to democratize language. Jacques Amyot, the sixteenth-century translator of Plutarch, had become the model for literary French, and as a result the written language was dead. Céline was not in fact an innovator in his use of argot – François Villon and Aristide Bruant were predecessors – his contribution was a revitalization of the French language, stressing its interior music, brutal vulgarity and dark comedy, welding Edouard Dujardin's interior monologue to the violence, hypocrisy and death spirit of the modern age, without the intellectualism of Joyce. In Céline's writing punctuation becomes musical notation, steps in an apocalyptic dance of death, which reaches its apotheosis in *Normance*.

In *Conversations with Professor Y* Céline claimed his "small contribution" had been to transpose the emotion of spoken language into literary French. He sends the reader roaring through an "emotive subway", giving the impression of immediacy and a voice inside the head. "In the beginning was not the Word, but emotion." By the time of *Fable for Another Time* and *Normance* he had seen too much hell to stop there. These books were deliberately unreadable in the conventional sense. He imagined his reader would react with disgust after only a few pages. At its most savage, his prose is a direct assault on his audience and on the official version of history, Judaeo-Christian philosophy, the novel and autobiography.

Céline's letters and drafts show he was in control of his medium. While there is a connection between his life and his imaginary world, *Fable for Another Time* is the work of a literary genius, not a desperate paranoiac, and *Normance* is a considered attack on both *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*. The schizophrenia of society and man is horrifyingly palpable as Céline transmogrifies his own suffering, adorning history with his legend and fantasies. If his were books "for another time", it was because he knew that it would be a century or more before they could be judged objectively. Proud, stubborn, a workaholic, Céline produced 80,000 handwritten pages from which to cull a first draft. He rewrote *Fable* many times, enriching as he went. He spoke of torturing the paper with his nib. His style was somewhere between music and poetry. Believing that the documentary and psychological functions of the novel were exhausted, he became a composer, a "musicien du français". Transparency, which he compared to his mother's lacemaking, was his goal. He sought to orchestrate a song of pain and horror from the internal rhythm of language by a "tension transposée musicale extrême". Not one syllable, one comma, was left to chance. Writing was like slashing a path through the tropical rain-forest, which closed behind as the explorer advanced. "I could shit out three conventional novels a year if I wished." Céline suffered from crippling anxiety, depression and a view of the world tainted by an emotionally starved childhood and a working life surrounded by the poor, sick and dying. He lived, with fearful courage, from day to day, often unable to anticipate the results of his actions, constantly placing himself in danger. The pen was his sword, hatred his shield. Forced exile and imprisonment focused his sense of human cruelty and language was his passionate refuge.

Dedicated to the defenceless "animals, sick and imprisoned", *Fable* was written out of "horror and disgust" at the eternal cycle of "bread and torture". Recounting the story of his incarceration and the prelude to flight, saturated with "blood, music and lace", it confuses time and space, blurring reality and fantasy in a whirlwind of dark comedy and violent imagery. Noise, cries and voices, assault the reader; dark imaginings leave us reeling in a miasma of suffering and conflicted history. The boundaries between the intimate and the public are sundered.

Orend, Karl. "A mirror held to horrors." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5542, 19 June 2009, pp. 19+. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FEX1200556298%2FTLSH%3Fu%3Dbritstaff%26sid%3Dbookmark-TLSH. Accessed 11 Dec. 2025.